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Resituating Disability in Japan: A Reading of Kenny Fries's

In the Province of the Gods (2017)

Abstract: Disability theorist Robert McRuer argues that Adrienne Rich's term 'compulsory heterosexuality' depends upon compulsory able-bodiedness— if one's sexuality is not compromised by disability which works as a metaphor of queerness s/he becomes a successful heterosexual. Kenny Fries, a contemporary American memoirist and poet makes himself visible penning his pains as a disabled, gay Jew. In his latest memoir *In the Province of the Gods* published in 2017, Fries relates his quest of the self as a disabled gay person in an orthodox society of Japan. A 'gaijin' (foreigner) to the Japanese culture, Fries, after being diagnosed with AIDS, comes to realize the Japanese concept of 'mono no aware'—the awareness of impermanence of earthly things. The paper seeks to study how the queer disabled subject celebrates his differences in a society historically hostile to difference and how he empowers himself by aligning himself with disabled Japanese gods. The paper explores how Fries seeks to unsettle the stereotypes about heteronormativity and challenge the 'abjection' (Kristeva) of the body. The paper investigates how queer-disability trumps over other minority statuses. The paper

also examines how the author regards queerness and disability as human variations, rather than as marks of inherent inferiority.

Keywords: ‘compulsory heterosexuality’, disability, queerness, Japanese culture, ‘mono no aware’, heteronormativity, ‘abjection’

Long the ‘Objects’ of others’ explorations and examinations, disabled people have recently assumed the ‘Subject’ position in/by representing themselves and re-telling their history of subjection down the generations in the hands of the so-called able-bodied society. Third person, often anonymous, narratives have dominated (or may be still dominating) the representations of disability in various literary genres, in mass media and in tacit cultural scripts. As G. Thomas Couser argues in his *Signifying Bodies: Disability in Contemporary Life Writing*: “Historically, then, disability has been represented primarily by non-disabled writers and almost exclusively in fictive or imaginative genres. Such representation, however, has typically been hostile, or, at best, patronizing toward people with disabilities.” Not until very recently that the disabled people themselves have taken the charge on their shoulders to answer the usual question they are forced to confront: “what happened to you?” Disability life narratives counter the moralizing, objectifying, and marginalizing representations of disability in the so-called canonized literature of the able-bodied people. Post-colonial or ‘anti-colonial’ in nature, disability life narratives can rightly be called ‘autoethnographies’, which Mary Louise Pratt has defined as:

“...instances in which colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways that engage with the colonizer’s own terms. If ethnographic texts are a means by which Europeans represent to themselves their (usually subjugated) others, autoethnographic

texts are those the others construct in response to or in dialogue with those metropolitan representations.”

Kenny Fries (b. 1960), a contemporary American memoirist and poet has started the process of making himself visible in the mainstream English literature by penning his experiences as a disabled, gay, Jewish man. Author of three memoirs, *Body, Remember: A Memoir* (1997), *The History of My Shoes and the Evolution of Darwin's Theory* (2007) and *In the Province of the Gods* (2017) and many poetry books like *Night After Night: Poems* (1984), *The Healing Notebook* (1990), *Desert Walking: Poems* (2000), *In the Gardens of Japan* (2017) etc, Fries makes use of the tool of literature to fight social exclusionary politics meted out against disability. Twice a recipient of the Fulbright Scholarship, Fries in spite of all his physical hindrances continues his research on disability history in Japan. Even after being diagnosed with HIV positive in America, he leaves for Japan without anyone to accompany him to complete his project and goes on pursuing his research on how disability is treated in Germany. Through his latest memoir *In the Province of the Gods*, Fries wages his battle against the ‘abjection’ of his body. Julia Kristeva in her *Powers of Horror* (1982) identifies ‘abjection’ or subjective horror as the feeling which individual experiences when s/he confronts (both mentally and as a body) her/his “corporeal reality”, and experiences a breakdown in the distinction between what is self and what is other. The sense of being abjected, which literally means “the state of being cast off”, is compulsory for a disabled body as it disrupts the conventional cultural concepts about the body. Judith Butler argues that the “exclusionary matrix by which subjects are formed... requires the simultaneous production of a domain of abject beings, those who are not yet subjects. Abject beings (here the disabled subjects) have bodies and desires that cannot be incorporated into social norms and so they inhabit the border between the acceptable and unacceptable.” In his

quest of how disability is dealt with in the Japanese culture, Kenny Fries finds out a haven for himself where he can equate his difference with that of the divine beings and his revolutionary memoir *In the Province of the Gods* (2017) charts his journey of the discovery of Japanese myths and culture related to disability.

Before elaborating Fries's findings related to disability in Japan, I would like to focus on his queer sexuality. "Coming out of the closet", to borrow Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's phrase, Fries normally proclaims his gay identity. Time and again, we see references to his gay partner Ian Jehle and husband Mike McCulloch and we get pen-portraits of his intimate love-affairs with his partners. Through his candid admissions about his queer sexuality he resists the 'compulsory heterosexuality', which according to Adrienne Rich is a "pervasive ideology" that represses everyone to adapt the societal norms of heterosexuality. Fries details his gradually worsening relationship with eighteen years' partner Ian: "The past year, things between us have been difficult. The pain in my left foot and my increasingly diminishing mobility reactivated the depression I first battled over a decade ago when I turned thirty..." (Fries 09) He cannot bear a separation from "the man who [he] still thinks of as [his] true soul mate, the love of [his] life" and confesses: "Separation is what we call it because neither of us can bear to say this is permanent: an end." (Fries 10) Abandoned by his eighteen years' partner Ian, Fries constantly suffers from loneliness. Repeatedly he mentions his loneliness: "...single for the first time in eighteen years...", "...I had no idea I would be going halfway around the world, alone.", "I do not want to be alone the first day after taking the medication.", "My first time in Japan, I arrived alone, anxiously wondering how Japanese would react to my disability." His acute sense of loneliness forces him to visit midnight gay bars in search of a true companion. At a crucial time, when he was left with no hope for any romantic relationship to grow because of his Retrovirus

infection, he finds out his true companion: “Since finding out I was HIV positive, I didn’t think a relationship could be possible. Among the numerous surprises Japan has given to me, Mike is perhaps the biggest surprise of all.” (Fries 134) Mike proves to be his soul mate: “Mike McCulloch, my husband, my lover, my best friend: you are the destination to which this book leads.” (Fries 195) Though he has not outspokenly clamoured against compulsory heterosexuality, the ease and flexibility of his expression while writing about his gay love life, registers his utter resistance to heteronormativity.

As is excerpted in the prologue, Japan, the veritable ‘province of the gods’ proves for Fries to be the “true place of origin”, where he “may be born... retrospectively”, for, not America, his native land rather Japan gifts him his *raison d’être*. His narrative registers how Japan, a society historically hostile to disabled people proves to be the utopia for Fries. Fries stresses the fact that disability, unlike impairment is a social creation. It is less inherent and more imposed by the society, which excludes people with different bodily affiliations from full participation in society. If this is his experience in America, in Japan people do not make him feel uncomfortable about his different body by only ‘staring’ at him. He confesses:

“I know there is nowhere I can go where I feel I fit in entirely. But here, being a *gaijin* comes first, not being disabled. In Japan I am treated as a foreigner because I am a foreigner, an outsider, while in the United States, my native country, I am treated as an outsider when I’m not. So far, in Japan my disability has been treated routinely as nothing more or less than a physical fact.” (Fries 60)

Tobin Siebers in his book *Disability Theory* (2008) argues:

“Disability offers a challenge to the representation of the body.....the disabled body provides insight into the fact that all bodies are socially constructed. Whereas, the medical model situates disability exclusively in individual bodies and strives to cure them by particular treatment, isolating the patient as diseased or defective, social constructionism makes it possible to see disability as the effect of an environment hostile to some bodies and not to others, requiring advances in social injustice rather than medicine.”

Fries wants his difference to be treated only as a ‘physical fact’ and not as an inherent lack resulted from any divine punishment for moral-failings of the parents. Fries denies to see “disability from the Buddhist point of view”, which sees disability as “the result of having done something wrong in a previous life.” (Fries 20) Instead, he searches for Ebisu, a disabled Japanese mythological god and other mythological supreme beings who had any kind of disability. During his first stay in Japan, Fries felt that “disability was not very public”, for, the disabled people were considered to be the “family shame” and were “hidden away” from the public. But, much surprisingly the scenario changed within three years as he confronted more people with disabilities on the streets of Japan. Fries culled his first knowledge about the disabled Japanese cultural icons from Lafcadio Hearn’s book *Kwaidan: Stories and Studies of Strange Things*. Here he comes across the Japanese version of the blind sage Tiresias of *Oedipus Rex* in Hoichi-the-Earless, “who has the means to negotiate between the seen and the unseen world”. He comes to know about Semimaru, the most famous blind *Biwa-hoshi*, “the eighth century blind story-tellers” who roamed the cities of Japan, chanting narratives by the aid of a “four-stringed fretted lute called *biwa*” for alms. Fries opines: “Other blind biwa singers elevated

Semimaru into a prince. Whether actual or mythic, Semimaru eventually became a godlike figure to many musicians, especially blind performers.” (Fries 54) Fries felt mesmerized with the fact that these disabled singers not only provided Japanese the access to a common national history but also helped establish the national language. In the preparation of his meeting with a famous Japanese disability studies expert, Hanada Shuncho, Fries comes across his article “History Is Being Created”, where Hanada has talked about the centrality of disability to Japanese culture. In his surprise, Fries discovers that the first child of the Shinto version of Adam and Eve, or the Japanese Creation god Izanagino-ko and goddess Izanamino-mikoto was a dumb child with physical disability. Deemed to be “a no-good child” by his own parents, Hiruko, the first child was abandoned and set adrift in a reed boat in the ocean to perish. His physical immobility was attributed to his mother’s improper manner of mating. Which adds new colours to this myth is that this Hiruko was resurrected as Ebisu, another deity. Associated with the Hiruko legend, Ebisu is often depicted with physical abnormalities like a disproportionately large head, a short torso etc. During the Edo period (1603-1868), Ebisu became the most popular of the seven lucky gods, the *shichifukujin*. Fries is happy enough to find out such a rich Japanese culture which has not only given space to a disabled person, but also made a deity out of his distorted body: “Thus gods who are supposed to bring about *fuku*, fortune, are the gods with *fugu*, distortion and disability. Fortunate distortion. A good description of my experience of Japan.” (Fries 136) With this revelation, Fries went to meet Hanada-sensei, who was born with cerebral palsy. Though Fries has received only indirect answer from Hanada like “The lesson I learned from Ebisu, from Ebisu fishing without moving, is that it’s better not to move”, he understands one very vital thing about disabled people that they should try what they can easily do and should not repent what they cannot do. And these realizations lead him to question the usual blindness of most of the

biwa hoshi. Hanada's answer:

“This goes back to Semimaru, one of the great one hundred poets. In Japan there has been a structure where people do the same thing for their entire life. One of the jobs for disabled people has been artistic, like playing a musical instrument. As in the *Heike monogatari*, the disabled have created the Japanese language.” (Fries 137)

Hanada acknowledges that he can do limited actions due to his disability, but he has strong belief that he can ‘concentrate’ on what he can do so that he can make the best out of it. Hanada does not see disability as other stalwarts of disability studies do. The struggle of the disabled people against the conventional norms of bodily normalcy betrays (at least, to some extent) their desire to be counted as a member of that very society, which itself inflicts discrimination on them.

Instead, Hanada seeks another kind of achievement:

“I was thinking what people with disabilities don't do. I was thinking there are few people who are studying disability. I was thinking to become an expert in some area. I was born disabled. I don't know another life.” (Fries 137)

During his meeting with Fukushima-sensei, the head of the Barrier-Free project of the University of Tokyo, Fries for the first time relates his views about disability:

“I began to see the story of evolution as an example of the social model of disability, how there is no such thing as ‘normal’, how each of us adapts to his environment.” Fries refuses to conform to the cultural ideals of the ‘normal’ body. Himself a silenced figure in the mainstream American intelligentsia, Fries refers to Alfred Russel Wallace, “the often-forgotten co-founder of the theory of natural selection”, “who wrote to Darwin about his evolutionary theory of natural selection.” In his memoir *The History of My Shoes and the Evolution of Darwin's Theory*, Fries

explicates how while writing his “book about Darwin, Wallace, and evolution”, he realized that his “shoes were an apt metaphor for variation and adaptation.” Here he gives his own personalized version of the theory of “survival of the fittest”—about his own ‘adaptations’ as represented by his “ever-changing, made-to-order, orthopedic shoes”. Fries fully agrees with the First UPIAS statement of Aims:

“...it is society which disables physically impaired people. Disability is something imposed on top of our impairment, by the ways we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society.”

He acknowledges:

“Everyone has limitations...its just that society views some limitations differently, as being more important, more limiting, than others. Might thinking that disabled people are more limited than the nondisabled be something we internalize without looking at how true it is?” (Fries 33)

After collecting knowledge about the ancient Japanese disabled cultural icons, Fries tries to contemporanizes his search and to that end he goes to Hiroshima to talk with “disabled *hibakusha*, literally bomb-affected people.” (Fries 70) He fixes up his meeting with the surviving *genbaku otome*, the so-called Hiroshima Maidens, who were chosen for plastic surgery in America. Fries registers A-bomb attack survivor Yamaoka-san’s complex reaction towards the attack:

“Because America dropped the A-bomb, I thought I deserved medical treatment. Of course I harbored hatred toward not only America but also the Japanese government. That’s because Japan started the war. I met so many good-willed Americans, especially Quakers, so I changed my way of thinking.” (Fries 170-71)

Fries can easily make difference between his kind of disability and the disability of the Hiroshima Maidens. Whereas, he never had a desire to be cured fully, because he does not know (physically) what it is to be fully cured, the Maidens “wanted to look ‘normal’ and ‘beautiful’ again.” He realized: “Born disabled, I never had a ‘before’ before.” (Fries 178) It is at this point that he fully understood the Japanese concept of *Mono no Aware*, which means “a resonance found in nature... a natural poignancy in the beauty of temporal things.” (Fries 48) As he is a born disabled, he never knew how it would be to be normal. So, for him, there is no ‘before’ and ‘after’ in his disability. But when Dr. Shay confirmed that he is suffering from AIDS, he realized that his life’s journey comes to an end and “for the first time, I felt as if, physically, there was a before and an after.” (Fries 177) He makes out what *Mono no Aware* is, only when he realized:

“the human body, disabled or otherwise, is a fact of a mortal life, a continuum with no before, no after...All bodies, at one time or another, for one reason or another, or no apparent reason at all, mutate, alter. The body, like Japan, is a process, not fixed in appearance, ability or time.” (Fries 178)

Fries’s quintessential view about disability is captured in the first image he draws in this memoir:

“...in the late afternoon mist, a man tending the rice paddy is smaller in comparison to his surroundings. It is not that the man himself is smaller, nor are his surroundings larger.

The way the man fits into his surrounding seems different but also familiar.” (Fries 11)

An interesting ending of this paper may be attempted with the test, which Fries himself created to judge a creative work. Being inspired by Alison Bechdel’s test, he introduced Fries Test and the writer Kenny Fries successfully qualifies in the test set down by the disability theorist Kenny Fries.

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